

Square Halos: A Thesis

BY

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Abstract

The work of Richard W. James explores themes of personal narrative creation and cognitive dissonance as affected by the influences of culture and religion. In first person narrative, this thesis paper discusses the body of work created for his thesis show in March, 2016. Specifically, this paper explores his motivations for making ceramic work and ways in which past explorations in the studio has led to his current body of work. His personal history, influences, use of form and material choices are explored in detail along with the future trajectory of the artwork.

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Square Halos: A Thesis Paper

“The corruption of cosmic symbolism can be understood by a simple comparison. It was like what happens to a window when a room ceases to receive light from the outside. As long as it is daylight, we see through our windowpane. When night comes, we can still see through it, if there is no light inside our room. When our lights go on, then we only see ourselves and our own room reflected in the pane... But the Gentiles had begun to forget the sky, and to light lamps of their own, and presently it seemed to them that the reflection of their own room in the window was the ‘world beyond.’ They began to worship what they themselves were doing” (Merton, 1974, p. 396).



Figure 1: R.W.James, *Doubting Thomas #4 (detail)*, 2016

I have been thinking about the ideas contained in the above quotation for far longer than I have been using clay. At an early age, I remember questioning whether humans see the color blue in the same way or if we all have different hues that we have learned to refer to as blue. Later, I discovered that this question was not unique to me, but was in fact discussed and probed in abundant detail by many great writers and thinkers. Alan Watts was the first philosopher with whom I connected who pursued this line of questioning. Watts' (1957) work led me to study Buddhism and the concept of

abandonment of self. Watts' work also led me to Aldous Huxley, who in turn, led me to the writing of Thomas Merton, Plato's "Allegory of the Cave," and William Blake. *"If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' the narrow chinks of his cavern (Blake, 1906, p.26)."* This line of reasoning has become the frame through which I view every piece of information I encounter, both written and visual and therefore also forms the basis for this current body of work.

Intention of the Work

The motivation behind this body of work is purely meditative in nature. I am not trying to communicate an idea or set of questions to the viewer. My hope is that the work is autonomous and functions more as a mirror than a billboard. It is not meant to be a conversation between maker and viewer, but a pathway to better view myself. Each development within the work serves to polish and refine the surface of that mirror, which in turn, allows me a more interesting and detailed self-interrogation for the next cycle. For me, the constant questioning of why and how I see things is the only question that matters, for it is the base of all my personality building, personal interaction, and understanding of both history and the present. All information presented to me has been filtered through the learned and inherited frame of reference of previous generations. With this being said, the self-analyzing aim of my artwork should not be taken as intent to alienate the audience. I hope that by not trying to convey any one specific idea, the work allows the mental space needed for the viewer to insert his or her own meaning and questions into the work. Optimistically, questions that cannot be easily put into words and would otherwise not have been asked will arise in the viewer upon seeing the work.

From Past to Present Work

In the past, I have tried to explore these ideas of human limitations of self-reflection through the symbolism of unchecked cell growth and atomic explosions. While these works were successful on a formal level, the personal connection was never present and left me unsatisfied with the finished product shortly after completion. My definition of a successful work is a piece that keeps me interested long after its completion and has me questioning the formal decisions made during the process while inspiring the viewer to do the same.

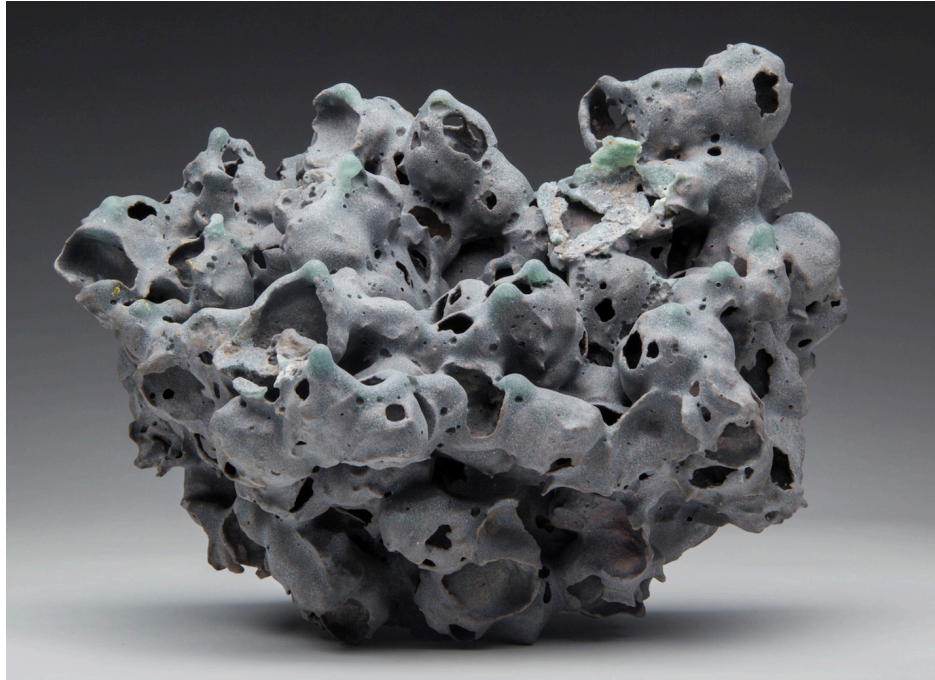


Figure 2: R.W. James, *Inside Study (lung)*, 2015

Working with the figure, specifically in a doll format, has afforded me that sense of wonder after the piece is “completed.” Representing human thought using abstraction removes the human and leaves only the idea to ponder. Adding the human to the piece allows me a more dynamic, personal, and honest representation. Realizing that all my forms are autobiographical, I find that it is more honest to represent myself concretely. While my aim is self-reflective in nature, it is my hope that the viewer might also place herself within the role of my doll forms.

Additionally, the construction of these doll forms allows for a dynamic, fluid process not afforded to me by past abstract forms. These doll pieces are made using clay to create the heads, hands, and feet in a construction method similar to that of a China doll. Making in this modular way allows me to continually rearrange the components of each piece throughout its time in my studio. Previously, when making entirely ceramic sculpture, the body is transformed into a finished and permanent object. The use of fabric works to support the sense of open-endedness felt in the piece. It can be touched, pushed and pulled, cut and eaten away by moths, constantly being changed by every move and the passing of time. I discovered that this living quality found in the method and material of my process helped to unite each piece in a more organic relationship, as I

can revisit earlier work and make changes to accommodate each addition to the group of artworks (see below iterative versions of the same piece.)



Figure 3: R.W.James, *The Horn Blower* (first version), 2015; *The Horn Blower* (second version), 2016

Personal History and Religion in Work

To integrate my philosophical interests and my artwork, I have chosen to focus on the figurative form and to draw from my experiences growing up in the rural south. The word rural can have a myriad of meanings, so I would like to give a few clarifying examples. My grandfather worked construction during the day and a 250-acre farm at night/weekends, yet could not read on a third grade level. My mother spent her childhood picking cotton in the summer, used an outhouse until late childhood, and

sewed her own wedding dress. My father was tilling fields unaccompanied by an adult by age ten, trusted with a two-ton piece of machinery. I am the first male in my family line to have not built his own house by the age of 25. Needless to say, I am a first generation college student (although my mother did begin college at roughly the same time as me and is now a principle at an elementary school). I come from a family line whose only means of survival and hopes of prosperity was through hard work and persistence, lessons that have been passed down to me and which I carry into my studio practice and professional life.

Closely tied to this rural way of life and perhaps the carrot on the end of the stick that made the long days seem endurable, was a very religious culture that glorified and honored working diligently and honestly for rewards in the next life. The Baptist church played as much of a role in my development as school did. The separating line between church and state in rural Tennessee is fuzzy and porous to put in minimally. The doctrine of Christianity is felt all the way from elementary school to the upper reaches of local government. It was with this interconnectedness of the “protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism (Weber,)” that I constructed my framework for viewing the world while growing up.

Like most young adults, as I began to experience life on my own, the radius of my worldview expanded at an exponential rate. Although still located in Tennessee, as a late adolescent I interacted with a range of people outside the small geographical area from which I had previously gleaned all my information and viewpoints. Collegiate reading (both required books such as Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, and self-discovered books by Alan Watts) led to an accelerated interest in understanding of how paradigms of learning work. I began to harbor resentments about the narrations I had earlier believed to be unquestionable truths. That resentment and constant questioning is still present in the work I make today.

Questions can really only lead to more questions, for answers are entirely dependent on the frame of reference of the answerer. As is not uncommon, I carried the angst of a typical twenty-something artist during my formative studio years, thinking and making work about contemporary issues of self-image, billboards, international conflict, politics, etc. (low-hanging fruit, looking back on it now). I was focusing on the

symptoms, rather than the causes that shaped humans into the race we are now. The farther back we look, the cruder the instruments of our social design. It is not a far stretch to see how the first hominoids walking on two legs, protectively guarding a fertile valley in order to propagate their genetic material, laid the groundwork for the success of capitalism. I have thought much about this lineage of social causation and have made it the focus of my graduate work. My abstract work was an attempt to ruminate on those fundamental workings – mainly the root function of reproducing on a cellular level and its correlation to how society at a higher level mimics those microscopic tendencies.

As I thought about those themes, I returned to the idea that I had not yet cleaned my “doors of perception” enough to really understand anything or at least not without the stigma of my cultural influence. Once again, I have turned my attention to the Judeo-Christian religion as a major defining influence. This influence permeates not only my own frame of reference, but also the entirety of western civilization due to the Catholic Church filling the power void left by the collapse of the Roman Empire.

I feel a deep connection to the early drafts of biblical stories depicted in the 14th century and the stylistic development of Michelangelo during the early stages of Mannerism. This connection is partially because of the thematic reason I have stated above and partially because this type of work was the first “serious art” I was exposed to in both school and church. In this way, I have constructed a bond with Mannerism that is both personal and conceptual.

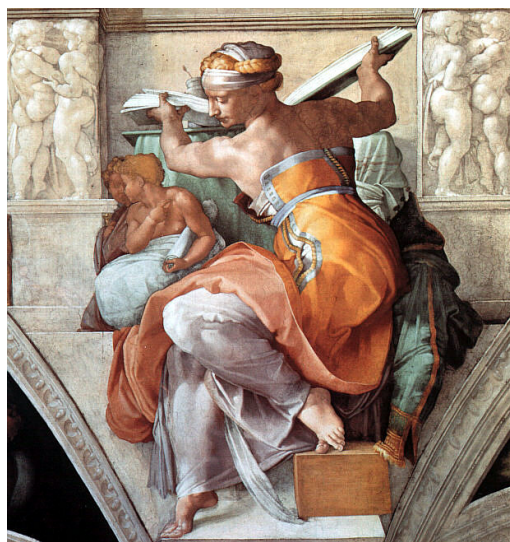


Figure 4: Michelangelo, *The Libyan Sibyl* from the Sistine Chapel ceiling, c. 1509

The religious themes and almost codified physical contortions of the human form provide a fertile garden of influence in which to make my own work. I want to be clear that I am not a modernist; neither do I rally to the flag of post-modernism in order to justify my use of classically influenced forms. It is my aim that any influence or reference in my work is a natural organic fit that is not tacked on for relevance to any current art “isms.”



Figure 5:R.W. James *The Seeders* (detail), 2016

Figure as Form and Influences

“...the creation of figurative ceramics can be seen as the ultimate act of hubris – the usurping of the power of the gods by man. It can be seen as man or woman trying his or her utmost to defy fate; play-acting as Creator, exploring the chance to fashion, express, and ultimately to control another, albeit an inanimate other. (Kemske, 2012, p. 10).”

Clay/earth is held as a significant material in the creation stories of many of the world’s religions. In the Judeo-Christian version, clay is used to symbolize both the beginning and the end. It was the material used to create our form to house the first breath of consciousness, while also serving as a constant reminder of our inescapable mortality and return to the ground. I find it apt that human ingenuity has usurped this allegorical meaning of clay with the technology of fire. We have gained the ability to change clay to ceramic through trial and error. The construction of this permanent and lasting material signified one of our first rejections of the natural order and one of our first steps toward self-determination as a species. This “ultimate act of hubris”, as Dr. Kemske describes, is one of my motivations for moving toward figurative work in my ceramic practice. I find personally mimicking this act of creation on a micro scale is a fitting way of critiquing, questioning, and sometimes mocking the notion of creation by a single entity.

The rich visual history from the time periods that I have a cultural interest in (late Renaissance/Mannerists, Roman Classicism, Byzantine, and Middle Americas spiritual forms) has given me an abundance of examples in rendering the human form, from crude mud effigies to classically carved marble, all of which carry their own unique power. I have experimented with a wide range of these styles and methods in an effort to find my own voice amidst all the dauntingly great works of art that have come before. Now that I am beginning to define my own visual vocabulary, I can look back and clearly see the influences that have shaped the work I am making now.

Typically, my artistic research begins with contemporary works of art and follows the artist’s tributaries of influence back through time. Judy Fox was the first artist to deeply affect me through figurative work. Although not generally associated with the clay community, she does use clay as her structural medium and to awe-inspiring affects.

It was after viewing her work at gallery 21 C in Louisville, KY that I first began to work with the human form in my studio at night (after days spent making pots to pay the bills.) I have heard it said that after one hears a new word for the first time, one is likely to hear it multiple times in the coming weeks; so it was with for me in regard to my exposure to proper use of the human form. All of the classical sculptures I had once passed eagerly in order to get to the modern and abstract sections of museums now held my attention. They revealed to me a new way of communication once I had seen this strong contemporary interpretation of their influence. After Judy Fox, my next major figurative impact was through the work of Doug Jeck. His sculpture captures a certain “off-ness” that I find mesmerizing. The truncated and misshapen figures were a perfect compliment to the perfectly proportioned and correct anatomy of Judy Fox’s work.

I was drawn to the mastery of craft and power of form of both artists. As I studied their seemingly opposing work, I found a common tie between the two. The use of clay within their work was purely a practical one. There was neither ode to the humble nature of clay nor praise of the process. Additionally, their works give no authority to the Bernard Leach/Shoji Hamada way of thinking that forms the base of contemporary clay culture.¹ Having been trained as a functional potter, I had unknowingly brought the Leach/Hamada mentality wholesale into my younger years of clay work, thinking at that time that the clay “way of life” was just as important as the work created. I no longer see the use of clay in such a simplistic manner. Looking back, this divorcing of a holistic way of life integrated within my studio practice and putting the finished work above any paradigms of the clay “way,” was inevitable considering the break from religious confines I had already made. I was, and still am, weary of swallowing introjects² wholesale within any aspect of my life. Breaking with religiosity early on allowed me later to abandon the same error in judgment of having accepted into my daily practice an unexamined cultural dictate. This abandonment of traditional ceramic process led me to

¹ Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada are considered by most clay scholars to be the founders of contemporary western clay and promoted the ideals outlined in “The Unknown Craftsman” (Yanagi, Leach, 1990)

² Introjects, a psychoanalytical term, is defined by the Farlex Medical Dictionary as a psychological defense mechanism involving appropriation of an external happening and its assimilation by the personality, making it a part of the self.

operate from a different viewpoint about the material with which I had spent my adult life working. This decision would come to be one of the most important developments of my studio practice.

Tracing the influence of particularly inspiring aspects of Doug Jeck's work led me to the sculpture of Edward Kienholz and the paintings of Odd Nerdrum. Following Kienholz's use of found objects opened up a new world of possibilities for me. The historical weight and utilitarian implications of each object I chose helped me to seat my pieces in the real world as opposed to limiting them to a pedestal upon which to be gawked at. The inherent expectation of motion in a boat motor and the implied sound of a depressed horn bring an exciting new dimension to my work. The use of antique objects also gives the work a sense of age that is not faux. The patina on a rusty piece of metal can never be replicated by hand with the same level of the sublime. The use of found material serves to keep my clay work honest. The objects I use have obviously had a life long before their incorporation into a sculpture and the ceramic components I create to co-mingle with them must respect that effect of time and environment.

The strange timelessness of Nerdrum's figures intrigued me. They were so plainly rooted in the medieval/feudal time period yet would not be completely out of place in any time period or location. I strove to capture this timeless characteristic within my own work. The head garb of "Seeders" is a direct nod to this influence. Nerdrum's particular way of capturing this displaced sense of time dovetailed wonderfully with the visual representation I envisioned while reading the book "Riddley Walker."

Undoubtedly the most influential piece of artwork to my own work, Russell Hoban's (year) novel about a post, post-apocalyptic society struggling to make sense of its past through half-destroyed works of art and misconstrued words handed down through generations is wonderfully and challengingly written and compels me to reread it every two years or so. The book is written in first person, using the words of the characters in the way they have become accustomed to their meaning. The result is a read that lends itself to new discoveries with each revisit. It gives a compelling and honest take on someone struggling to find a place in the world using diluted, or just plain

false information. Because of its Clockwork Orange-like³ use of ambiguous language, the novel is ripe for a rich and individualistic interpretation of the world it describes. The majority of my visual influence comes from self-created images used to flesh out the vague world contained in the book. Consequently, my work exists in a place that could be in the past, far future, or just parallel to our own. This novel laid the groundwork for me to create my own fictional society where the components are similar and recognizable, but different in a jarring way. I believe that using the juxtaposition of familiar and strange spurs internal questions not otherwise asked if the time and place are easily identifiable.

Importance of the Doll Form and its Materials

Constructing my sculptures in the style of a doll fulfills numerous needs within my studio practice, both on a material and thematic level. Encyclopedia Britannica states “the doll, the familiar toy puppet of childhood, is one of the oldest of human institutions.” I find this form fitting as a tool in the constant reexamination of my past and the role religion has played in its shaping. The doll has a varied history and its function ranges wildly from culture to culture, from the voodoo doll of Haiti to the child’s plaything of Europe. There is a promising juxtaposition in the acquiescent and submissive nature of the later with the spiritual power of the former that I hope to achieve with my work. I have just now begun to explore the relationships between the strong historical and subconscious underpinnings of the form and the formal interactions between the clay, wood, cloth, and found objects.

³ Anthony Burgess’s 1962 novel is known for its unique use of Russian-influenced slang that creates a strong ambiguity about the description of events.



Figure 6: R.W.James, *The Seeders*, 2016

While these reasons are exciting to ponder and explore in the future, they are ultimately connections discovered during the making of the work, rather than the reason I started making the work. The primary reason that I started to incorporate the materials necessary in making dolls has a much more personal motivation. As I considered my past and its effects on my present, two people stood out in its shaping. My mother and father are both makers in their own way, though not out of leisure or hobby, but out of necessity. For me, the materials I associate with each parent is inextricably linked to my memories and feelings about how each taught me, both through conscious and unconscious communication, about the world and how to navigate it in a meaningful way. With my father I associate the structured forethought required in the planning and building of houses and working on a farm schedule. The wood and infrastructure of my work has come to represent his influence on my life. It embodies the qualities he has passed on to me and were passed on to him from his father-the backbone of my work ethic, perseverance, and the gristle upon which both my work and I are built. The malleable fabric I associate with my mother personifies the feminine facet of this partnership. Responsiveness, forgiveness, comfort, and warmth are the adjectives I attribute to the use of cloth within my work. Just as my father's rigidity has shaped my internal structure, my mother's influence has affected my exterior interaction with the world outside. I have fond memories of playing with sewing tools and of the love apparent in the hand-mended stitches on worn-out clothes. In my work, the string has also come represent the interconnectedness of all thoughts and actions. By making these personal connections to the materials, each formal choice is imbued with a greater sense of meaning and respect to the whole of the work rather than just the surfaces. I have come to see the ceramic component as symbolic of myself in this trinity. Clay can be both malleable and rigid; can mimic both fabric and steel.

Using the traditional European ceramic doll as a format, the material with which I have come to connect myself (clay) is used to make the extremities. Extremities primarily interact with the world through the five senses. The hands and feet with touch, while the head contains sight, sound, smell, and taste. Because clay is the material through which I make sense of the world in my own way, I see it a fitting match.



Figure 7: R.W.James, *Peter to Paul*, 2016



Figure 8: R.W. James, *Doubting Thomas #2*, 2016

Future Work

Going forward, I am eager to explore different facets of my thesis exhibition in greater detail. For instance, in this body of work the found object played an important role in its thematic and structural success. Of the objects that I used, the scale contains the most potential for exploration within my future work. Thematically, the scale symbolizes a certain type of self-assessing that is at the core of my work. The functioning scale also allows the viewer access to the sculpture in a new and meaningful way. Specifically, examining the object's weight adds information about its mass to that which was already apparent in plain sight. I have always searched for truth in my work and this instrument presents me with an opportunity to convey one more aspect of that honesty. Along with the found objects, I am looking forward to developing my sewing abilities and approaching the non-clay bodies in a more robust and detailed way, possibly with the use of hand-loomed fabric and basket reeds. Above all, the direction of my work will progress to be completely thorough in its craftsmanship with every material made or chosen in a meaningful way.

On the scholarly side of my studio practice, I plan to become more educated in two specific areas of study. First, I am interested in the doll and its uses across history and location. I have begun to acquire a collection of doll history texts and hope to become more knowledgeable in this area with the goal of more subtly incorporating its strong connotations within my work. Secondly, I plan a continued study of Mannerism and the end of the Renaissance period. As I hope I have illustrated earlier in this thesis paper, this time frame in the arts is rife with connections to the issues I find interesting in the current world.



Figure 9: R.W. James, *Sketch Book Page*



Figure 10: R.W.James, *Doubting Thomas #1*, 2016



Figure 11: R.W. James, *Doubting Thomas #5*, 2016



Figure 12: R.W.James, *The Horn Blower (detail)*, 2016

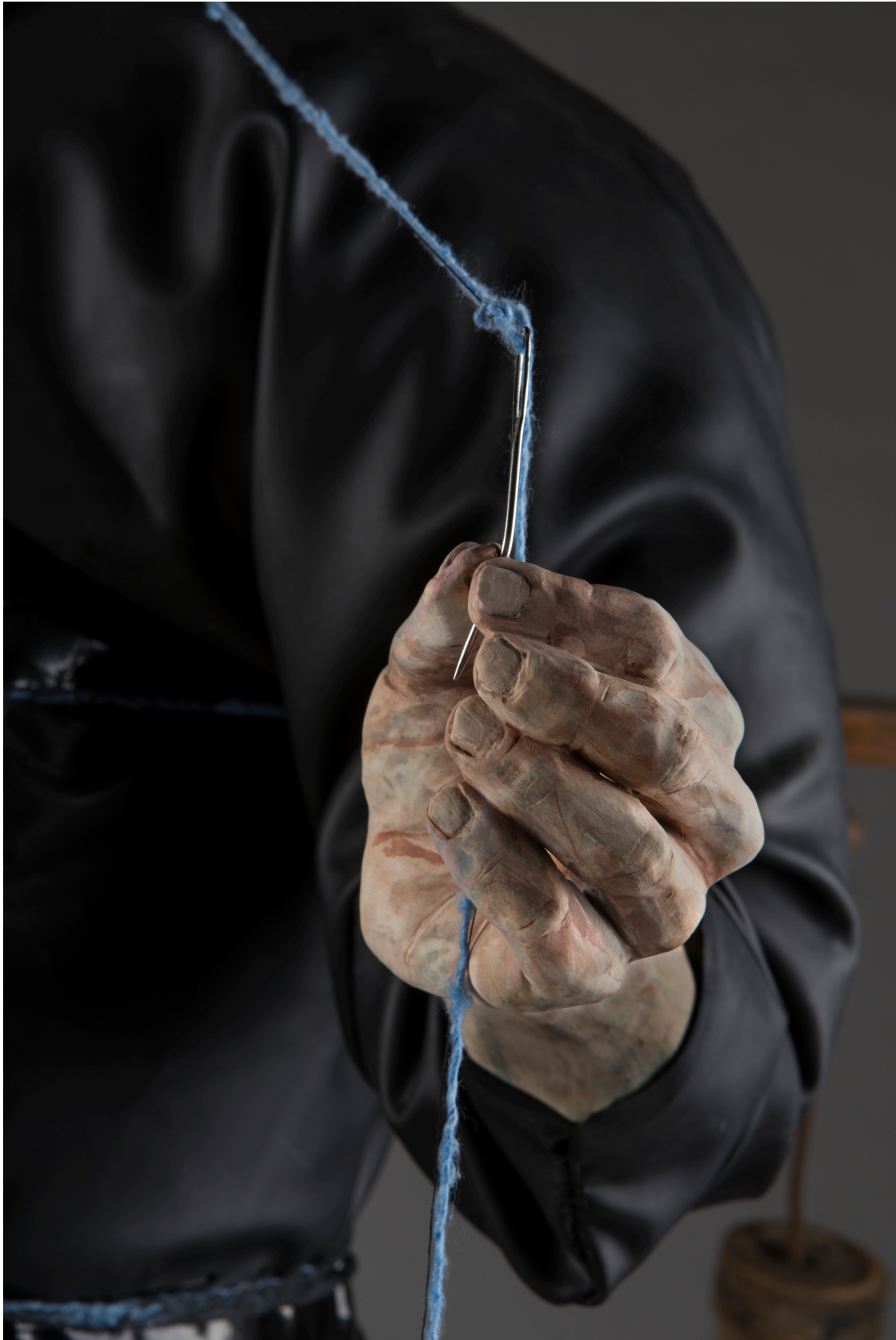


Figure 13: R.W.James, *Peter to Pay Paul* (detail), 2015

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